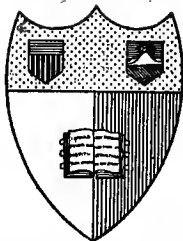


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# SOCIAL SERVICE BULLETIN

The purpose of the Bulletin is to offer suggestions for the conduct of work for the common good in our churches, and also to give circulation to articles of value on different phases of the social question,—some original contributions, and others reprints from the magazines and the reports of various societies.

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**AMERICAN UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION**

**25 Beacon Street, Boston.**

**Department of Social and Public Service**

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Social Service Series

Bulletin Number 16

**Comprehensive Planning for Small  
Towns and Villages**

By

John Nolen 1889

Boston

American Unitarian Association

25 Beacon Street

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## Comprehensive Planning for Small Towns and Villages\*

My plea is for the smaller places, the towns and villages with a population ranging from 2,500 to 25,000, or even up to 50,000. There are many misconceptions about city planning, but none is farther from the fact than the notion that comprehensive planning is only for large cities. As a matter of fact, the reverse is nearer the truth. In big cities the conditions are fixed, inelastic, unyielding. Comprehensive planning, especially with our limited city charters and the hampering laws of our States, can have as yet but little play in larger places. At most it must content itself with relieving only the worst conditions, ameliorating merely the most acute forms of congestion, correcting only the gravest mistakes of the past. Wide, many-sided, imaginative planning for large American cities must be confined for the present at least mainly to the extension of those cities, to the improvement of suburban areas, to the betterment of what are often really separate towns on the outskirts.

But with smaller towns and villages the case is

\*Address delivered in Washington, D. C., at the annual meeting of the American Civic Association.

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different. To them comprehensive planning can render a big and lasting service. For there is scarcely anything in them that cannot be changed, and most of the territory that is to be built upon is still untouched. The present town is only the nucleus of the future city. In them railroad approaches can be set right, grade crossings eliminated; water fronts redeemed for commerce or recreation or both; open spaces secured in the very heart of things; a reasonable street plan can be made and adequate highways established; public buildings can be grouped in some proper way, and a park system, a true system, with all sorts of well-distributed, well-balanced public grounds can be outlined for gradual and orderly development. And all these elements, indispensable sooner or later to a progressive community, can be had with relative ease and at slight cost. As we have given heretofore too much attention to caring for the mere wreckage of society, and too little toward establishing a better social order that would reduce that wreckage, so we have expended too much of our energy in merely thinking of the ills that afflict our great cities instead of providing against an unnecessary repetition of those selfsame ills in smaller places, many of them to be the important cities of to-morrow. To cure is the way of the past, to prevent the divine voice of the future.



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Then smaller towns are important because of their great number. In 1900, there were over 1,700 places in the United States with a population from 2,500 to 25,000, and the aggregate of these towns exceeded ten million. The figures of the 1910 census will no doubt show a vast increase, and these figures will probably exceed the total of all cities with a population of 300,000 or over. The six great cities with 500,000 or more had by the same census (1900) only a population of 8,000,000, 2,000,000 less than these smaller towns. How extensive, therefore, are the interests of these widely distributed smaller cities, with more than ten million souls to-day and the number and proportion steadily and rapidly increasing!

The two important methods of town and city planning are: (1) cities planned in advance of the settlement of population, and (2) established cities replanned or remodeled to meet new conditions. The former method has obviously great advantages, and many cities intended primarily for governmental, industrial, or residential purposes have been so planned. It is a method which needs wider use. Washington is the most notable illustration. But after all, it is seldom possible to foresee the future of a town or city from the very start, and the complex influences which determine the selection of the site and location of the first streets and buildings

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must usually be left to work out their natural results. When, however, a small population has been attracted to a town by natural causes and there are unmistakable indications that because of situation, climate, the trend of trade and commerce or other forces, an important city is to be established, then it is entirely practicable intelligently to replan the town so as properly to provide for its future. There are scores of cities in this country with a population to-day of 25,000 people that will have 50,000 in a generation or less, and the same rate of increase may be predicted with equal confidence of cities of larger population. The greatest neglect is right here, the failure to plan and replan, to adjust and readjust, consistently to use art and skill and foresight to remodel existing conditions and to mould and fit for use the new territory about to be occupied.

The emphasis, it would seem, needs to be placed less on the original plan and more on replanning and remodeling, provided action is taken in time. The beautiful cities of Europe, those that are constantly taken as illustrations of what modern cities should be, are without exception the result of a picturesque, almost accidental growth, regulated, it is true, by considerable common sense and respect for art, but improved and again improved by replanning and remodeling to fit changed conditions

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and rising standards. It is here that we fall short. Throughout the United States there are cities with relatively easy opportunities before them to improve their water fronts, to group their public buildings, to widen their streets, to provide in twentieth century fashion for transportation and to set aside areas now considered indispensable for public recreation, and yet most of these cities have until recently stood listless, without the business sense, skill, and courage to begin the work that must sooner or later be done.

In the development of city plans for these smaller communities, I wish to advocate three points: (1) the exercise of more forethought; (2) the use of skill; (3) the adoption of an appropriate goal or ideal.

First, then, more forethought. One clear lesson of the census is the growth of cities. They move noiselessly from one class to another with little notice and less preparation. With growth their requirements change radically, but little or nothing is done to meet these changing requirements. Especially is this true of the construction of wide thoroughfares and the acquisition of land for public purposes. Instead of being always in advance of the requirements, as the city should be in these matters, it is almost invariably behind. The foresight of the German cities, the best-handled municipi-

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palties in the world, is instructive. Their plans are nearly always a score of years in advance of the requirements, and there is a definite and liberal policy for the purchase of land against future needs, some cities owning as much as half their building areas and having permanent land funds of millions of dollars set apart for further acquisitions.

Secondly, a greater use of skill and experience should be employed in the planning and building of small cities. Failure to employ such skill is the reason for much of our trouble to-day. Somehow, we are not yet very generally convinced of the value of the man who knows. "Democracy's attitude toward the expert," declares a contemporary writer, "is a mean and foolish attitude. No greater service can be rendered to the democratic cause than that which shall cleanse it of this fault. Generous, whole-hearted, enthusiastic recognition of superior ability and training, a reverent appreciation of high character and high attainment, and a capacity to trust and value these as they deserve: these are virtues which democracy cannot set itself too resolutely to attain, nor can it value too highly any lesson that will assist it in their cultivation." Long ago, John Stuart Mill gave brief expression to the same idea when he said: "The people should be masters employing servants more skilful than themselves."

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A third requirement is the adoption of an appropriate goal or ideal. Changes are inevitable. We know that. And if these changes are unguided they are almost certain not to be good. The future should not be taken at hap-hazard. We should determine, at least in a general way, what we wish it to be, and then strive to bring it to pass. Above all, consistency is a requirement, and some appropriate and controlling ideal of development. The individual topography and situation of cities, the differences in social conditions, in the varying economic functions of different communities—these factors and others should all find opportunity for natural expression in the city plans of smaller places, which can often be carried out easily, especially if the co-operation of private individuals can be secured.

These three suggestions for smaller places are perfectly practicable, and have already been adopted and acted upon by some American communities. As a concrete illustration, I should like to present an outline at least of the policy and achievements of Glen Ridge, New Jersey, a Borough, about twelve miles from New York City, with a population slightly less than twenty-five hundred. To the natural loveliness of its situation, Glen Ridge has added much by an enlightened public policy and a united civic spirit, that are seldom found

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in such a highly developed form in so small a place. Foresight, generous public expenditure, and wisdom have combined to give to the present generation and insure to the future certain public advantages of very great value. In the first place, the most characteristic and most beautiful natural feature of the Borough—the Glen—has been secured for a public park. This is a valuable asset, one that could not be duplicated by human means. Yet its character and situation are such that in private hands it probably would have become a nuisance and an eyesore. The people of Glen Ridge cannot be too highly commended for making this acquisition in time. Then the Borough, acting, I presume, with the railroad officials, has given what appears to be, on the whole, the best locations for the railroads and the stations. There are within the Borough limits only two grade crossings (these soon to be removed), the stations are central and their surroundings attractive. There has been displayed a tenacity and foresight as fine as it is unusual in controlling certain outdoor features which tend in a high-grade residence town to become nuisances. I refer particularly to unsightly poles and wires, ill-placed and inappropriate stores, apartment houses and tenements.

Following this wise and progressive policy, as the next logical step, some of the public-spirited citizens of Glen Ridge arranged to have prepared a

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comprehensive plan and report as a guide to future action. That report was prepared, and contained the following recommendations:

(1) That the plan for the contemplated improvement of the Station and surroundings of the Lackawanna Railroad include the widening of Ridgewood Avenue at the bridge, adequate space south of the station for carriages and other vehicles, with a new approach from Woodland Avenue, the abolishing of the grade crossing at Hillside Avenue, and the widening of Clark Street where it passes under the railroad.

(2) That efforts be made to obtain from the Erie Railroad the removal of the grade crossing at Wildwood Terrace and the construction of the Sherman Avenue bridge.

(3) That the Glen Ridge Centre, at the intersection of Ridgewood and Bloomfield Avenues, be improved and perfected by the acquisition of the property at the northwest corner, and its use for some public or semi-public purpose.

(4) That the advantages of building a Borough Hall, a few stores, and perhaps a small hotel or inn near the Borough Centre be seriously considered with a view to action.

(5) That consideration be given in advance of actual need to a convenient trolley route to provide

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service when necessary north and south through the Borough.

(6) That Ridgewood Avenue and its proposed extension be improved as an integral part of the proposed twelve-mile Circuit Drive in Montclair and Glen Ridge.

(7) That the Essex County Park Commission be petitioned to locate at once, and execute as soon as possible, a parkway that will connect the main drives of Glen Ridge with the County Park System.

(8) That the whole method of locating public streets and roads be investigated for the purpose of protecting the interests of all the people of Glen Ridge and the further improvement of the Borough as a place of residence.

(9) That building ordinances be considered, with the intention of promoting health, preserving the homogeneity of neighborhoods and protecting the stability of real estate values; also that property owners be asked to co-operate in this provision by writing suitable restrictions in their deeds of sale.

(10) That the Shade Trees Commission, the formation of which is advocated, be requested to take up in a broad and efficient way, the whole question of planting and maintaining street trees.

(11) That the land already purchased by the



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Borough for parks and playgrounds be developed and utilized as rapidly as possible under carefully prepared plans, including a wading pool, skating pond, and outdoor gymnastic apparatus.

(12) That some public authority be empowered to study and survey the Borough with a view to establishing an adequate system of school yards, school gardens, playgrounds and parks for the present population and to reasonably anticipate the needs of the immediate future.

These twelve recommendations have not ended on paper. Although they were presented only a year ago, definite and substantial progress has been made on every one of them, and six of the twelve, the most important six, have been carried out completely. Glen Ridge is already unlike any other town; it has its own character, its own claims to distinction. Wisely has it reflected its topography in its streets and other public places, and developed its public ideals with a rare regard to essential public needs. Consistently following what is best in the past, the present plan is intended to promote an even clearer consciousness on the part of the citizens generally of what the Borough life should be, to avoid the oversights and mistakes of merely drifting, and secure the well-defined results of a carefully considered plan and program for the future, all of which upholds my view of the possibili-

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ties of comprehensive planning for small towns and villages. Compare with these results the inaction or halting action of larger places even when admirable and generally approved of plans have been placed in their hands for execution.

Finally, the most astonishing thing about American town and city planning is the constant repetition of the same mistakes. Over and over again we see the same errors, the same foolish and costly departure from what is recognized as good practice. Our towns and cities are inert. If they were not, the smaller ones at least could be saved by foresight and skill from many of the mistakes from which the larger cities now suffer. "Remedy for a bad plan once built upon being thus impracticable," wrote Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., decades ago, "now that we understand the matter we are surely bound, wherever it is by any means in our power, to prevent mistakes in the construction of towns. Strange to say, however, here in the New World, where great towns by the hundred are springing into existence, no care at all is taken to avoid bad plans. The most brutal pagans to whom we have sent our missionaries have never shown greater indifference to the sufferings of others than is exhibited in the plans of some of our most promising cities, for which men now living in them are responsible."





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